

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

May 14, 2013 | By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

The following was published in the [Washington Post, On Faith](#) on May 14, 2013.

Fifteen years ago, on May 14, 1998, U.S. House of Representatives voted in favor of a landmark effort to promote a pivotal human right abroad. In October of that year, the Senate also acted and President Clinton signed the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA, into law. Among other provisions, IRFA created the Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department and the independent, bipartisan Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), of which I am chair.

As part of our mandate, USCIRF issues an annual report on the global state of religious freedom. [On April 30, we issued our 2013 report.](#)

How is this freedom faring today? As our report confirms, it is imperiled daily. Violations range from restrictions on building houses of worship to more severe abuses, including arbitrary

detention, torture, and even murder.

For humanitarian reasons alone, we should care. But in our ever-uncertain post-9/11 world, we have further cause for concern.

As our report shows, one of today's most powerful drivers of these outrages are the forces of violent religious extremism. These forces hijack religion and undermine countries of critical importance to the United States. Extremists destroy others' freedom, fueling destabilization and despair.

Unfortunately, the governments of some countries promote or embody these forces. By their action or inaction, other governments respond to extremist threats in deeply flawed and counterproductive ways. Some insist on enforcing religiously radical and abusive measures of their own, while others permit such abuses to occur with impunity. Still other governments seek to combat extremism with repressive measures that risk producing more of the very problem they seek to diminish. This dangerous and self-defeating dynamic threatens others' religious freedom and America's own security.

The cover of the [2013 USCIRF Annual Report](#), which shows a Burmese mosque burn to the ground, highlights how this threat of violent extremism touches numerous countries and cultures.

Iran is a blatant example of a violent theocracy which persecutes those contradicting its own interpretation of Shi'i Islam – from Baha'i, Christian, and Sunni Muslim minorities to dissenters within its Shi'i majority.

Pakistan and Egypt are countries whose governments enforce religious measures that unintentionally spur extremists to assault perceived transgressors. In Pakistan, blasphemy-like laws fuel the violence of terrorist groups against Christians and Ahmadis, and sectarian hatred motivates unprecedented attacks against Shi'i Muslims. In Egypt, prosecution of Coptic Christians and dissenting Muslims for "contempt" of religion can and does encourage violence against them. Unfortunately, problematic provisions in Egypt's new constitution support these laws.

Nigeria's government provides an example of how toleration of extremism ensures further abuses. Nigeria has failed to protect its people from Boko Haram, an Islamist terrorist group, or to prosecute both Muslims and Christians guilty of religiously-related violence that has killed more than 14,000 citizens over the past decade.

Finally, China and Russia are nations whose leaders use the threat of extremism to repress entire religious communities, risking the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Witness China's relentless persecution of Uighur Muslims and especially Russia's oppression of Chechens and other Muslims.

Why should Americans care about others' freedom? While religious freedom is our first freedom, enshrined in our First Amendment and conceived as a right to which everyone is entitled, it also is recognized by international law and treaty, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Moreover, religious freedom is connected unmistakably to a country's well-being. Research finds that it is associated with vibrant political democracy, rising economic and social progress, diminished violence, and greater stability. Nations that disrespect this freedom are incubators for poverty and instability, war and terror, and violent radical movements and activities.

This last point is crucial. As the 9/11 attacks and subsequent atrocities tragically have shown, we cannot count on the containment of violent religious extremism within countries or regions.

The best way for nations to counter the extremism of some is not through the repression of all, nor by appeasement or neglect of the extremists, but by freedom. The United States should champion a free and vibrant marketplace of ideas, including religious ideas, and support the rule of law which makes freedom possible. Our report highlights many avenues to promote this indispensable liberty.

Freedom is where our values and interests, our idealism and realism, meet. As Americans, we can and should honor both by supporting religious freedom for all.

Katrina Lantos Swett serves as Chair of the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF).

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